

COOKING UP A BATCH OF TEAM SYNERGY

Ingredients for Setting Up Successful Teams

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Welcome, my friends, to an era when change is so fast and furious you don't dare blink for fear of losing your place in a reinvented or restructured society. Congress is madly restructuring political power bases as Republicans take over committees. The Administration is reinventing government, struggling to bring about their long-advertised downsizing. Why, even that dreaded, eight-page federal form, SF 171—the one used to apply for a job with the government—is being redesigned into a one-page resume. In our own arena, reform in DoD's massive acquisition community is being cheered on by businessmen and bureaucrats alike. Change is in the air, and along with it comes a taste for reinvention and a yen to restructure our established institutions.

Business Gets in the Act

Not one to be left out of any race for change and reinvention, the business world is busy working on its own strategy to restructure itself. Forward-looking businesses are preparing for competition in a new world by taking a new look at their basic organizational structures and processes. Then they're

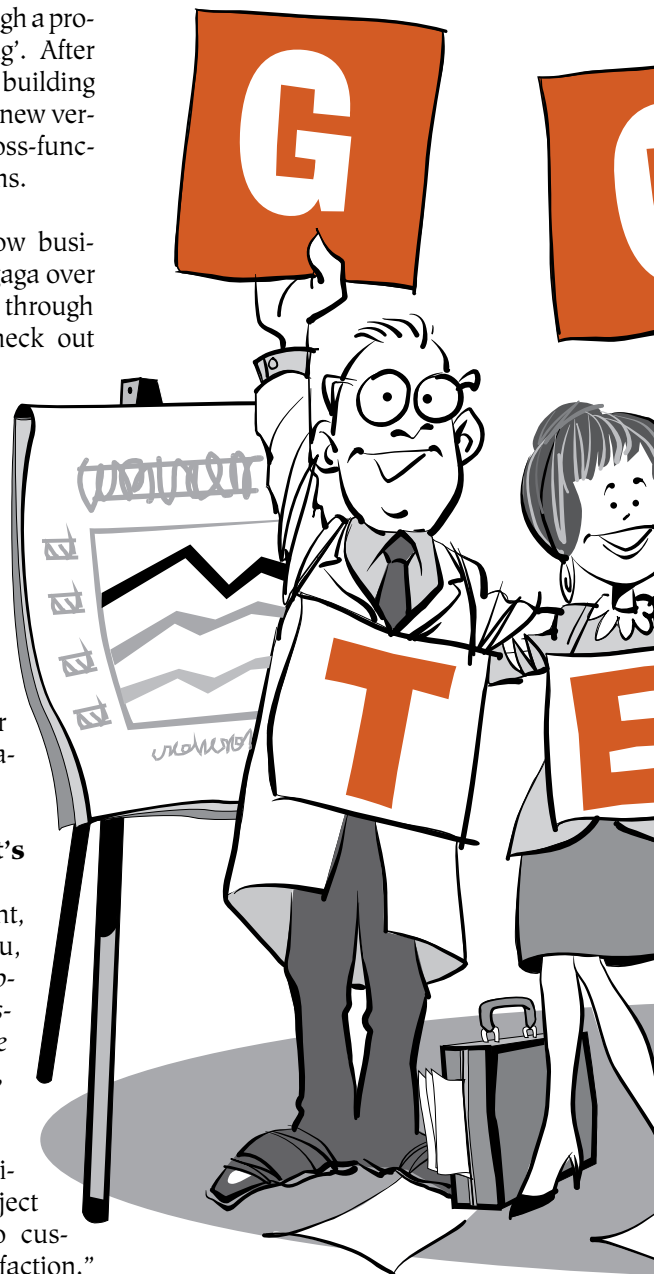
redesigning themselves through a process they call 'reengineering'. After that, one of the most popular building blocks they're using to build new versions of their old selves is cross-functional, product-oriented teams.

Surely you've noticed how businesses are going just a little gaga over the team concept. Thumb through business magazines and check out hardbacks in the business section and you'll find titles like, *The Discipline of Teams*, *Why Some Teams Don't Fail*, *Team-Based Organizations*, and *Empowered Teams*. And if you're like more than 50 percent of the workers in America's Fortune 1,000 companies, you've already been assigned to one team or another under your company's latest reorganization scheme.

The Team Concept — It's Here Now

As if to reiterate the point, well known management guru, Tom Peters, in his book, *Liberation Management: Necessary Disorganization for the Nanosecond Nineties*, states, "Success is the judicious application of sharply focused, management-nurtured, multi-disciplined, empowered project teams totally committed to customer involvement and satisfaction."

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With statistics and statements like these, it's easy to see that the team concept has arrived. These days, if you can't speak 'teamspeak', you're tagged as an old fogey stuck in the bygone era of stovepipes and functional fiefdoms.

Do these multi-disciplined teams work? Simple math says they do. Check with NCR, which reduced development time in half and product assembly time by a fourth for its new

terminal by using cross-functional teams. Or ask John Deere and Company, which reduced costs of developing its construction and forestry equipment by more than 30 percent, and reduced assembly time for harvesting equipment in its East Moline [Illinois] factory by 10 percent.

Still, dollars and cents aren't the only reason teams make sense these days. Companies in the fast lane of today's global competition are discovering that they

must be highly flexible just to survive, and one of the strongest advantages of being organized by teams is — you guessed it — flexibility. Teams can be organized and reorganized, and then directed and re-

directed much faster than the unyielding bureaucracies of the past.

Along with the advantages of flexibility and cost savings, managers are recognizing that teams can be willing partners in their search for that elusive, holy grail of management — empowerment. Most companies include strong doses of empowerment in their new team philosophy, so it's fairly easy to hand a team a mission and tell them they own that mission. Even if there weren't such a good fit between teams and empowerment, managers are discovering they must give these new teams wide-ranging powers whether they like it or not. With "downsizing" becoming a household word, remaining managers are forced into empowerment, or they risk catching the Japanese disease of *karoshi* — death from overwork. Add the 'plus' you get from the improved morale of a well run, tight-knit team, and it's easy to see why teams have become the new darling of organizational strategists.

As the concept of empowered, customer-oriented teams works its way into the boardrooms of America, even the most static of American institutions, government, is seeing the same concept creep down its own hallways. Three years ago, the Air Force's Materiel Command began converting its programs to empowered, cross-functional teams under an approach it calls Integrated Product Teams. Not to be left out, the Navy sailed into this new sea change at the Naval Air Warfare Center at Patuxent River, Maryland, by breaking down their functionally oriented departments and replacing them with customer-oriented, multi-disciplined project teams.

Symphony or Cacophony

As always though, any new idea brings its own set of problems when you get down to the brass tacks of implementation. Many managers discover that it's



easy to reorganize into cross-functional, self-directed teams, but it's not always easy getting them to perform like a true team. Some make the mistake of throwing a new group of people together, slapping the label 'team' on them, and then standing back and expecting great things to happen. They usually don't. Uproot individuals from their old, comfortable positions and put them into a new team, and you're more likely to end up with a cacophony of discord than a symphony of teamwork.

Worse yet, many managers cut teams loose under the banner of empowerment and find out too often and too late that they're headed down a rocky sideroad to disaster rather than the superhighway to success. How then can leaders help create a synergy of teamwork that helps ensure team benefits such as flexibility, creativity, and cost savings? And how can you give teams enough freedom to keep them motivated while still monitoring them closely enough to catch them before they fall? Answers should be easy. After all, we've been forming teams of one sort or another since hunting parties sallied forth to stalk the woolly mammoth. Still, getting teams to perform at top levels remains difficult.

What Exactly Is a Team?

Much of the misunderstanding has to do with how loosely the word 'team' is used. Because teamwork is vital to the success of any organization, managers tend to label any group of people a team, believing that teamwork and cooperation will automatically follow. Labeling Northwest Airlines as Team Northwest, for example, hardly makes Northwest a true team, but managers and CEOs love it because it is a catchy phrase for corporate letterheads and advertising posters. There's nothing inherently wrong with calling such a large corporation a team, but large numbers of people are not likely to think of themselves as a real team, no matter how diligently managers apply the label.

Katzenbach and Smith, authors of *The Wisdom of Teams*, found that few successful teams were composed of more than 25 team members. Even Ralph Nader, that conscience of Congress and adversary of bureaucrats, has discovered the benefit of organizing into smaller rather than larger teams. In a talk in Washington D.C., he told of how his organization has reorganized itself into groups of 15 or less and noted that, "With small groups, it's much more difficult to pass ownership around." Group dynamics being what they are, groups of say, 30 or more, tend to break themselves down into smaller groups anyway.

Another related area of confusion centers around the concept that real teams always have a goal that's shared by all team members. A collection of people working on individual assignments with individual goals is hardly a team. A group of accountants examining tax returns with quotas on the number of tax returns examined each day can hardly be called a team.

One other key ingredient of teams is that they involve people with skills that complement each other as they work toward their common goal. Think of a baseball team. There's a pitcher, a catcher and fielders, all with different skills that complement each other as they work toward the common objective of winning a game.

What all this boils down to is that for a group to be a real team, they should be a relatively small number of people with complementary skills, and they must have a common goal. Glenn M. Parker, author of *Team Players and Teamwork: The New Competitive Business Strategy*, puts it this way: "A group of people is not a team. A team is a group of people with a high degree of interdependence geared toward achievement of a goal or the completion of a task. In other words, they agree on a goal and agree that the only way to achieve the goal is to work together." Notice the emphasis on a common goal and interdependence. If

these elements are missing or are unclear, managers can not expect to see high performance from a team, no matter how hard they try to force the square peg of a group into the round hole of a team.

Upsides and Downsides

Nor should they, no matter how popular the concept is these days. Teams are only one tool managers have at their disposal. On the downside, restructuring into cross-functional teams can interrupt and disrupt organizations' productivity, and with their thirst for functional experts, they can be one of the more expensive organizational structures. Integration of teams' activities can also be a nightmare. Like functionally oriented organizations, teams can get tunnel vision and forget that there are other missions and reasons for an organization's existence.

On the plus side, teams excel when creativity is needed or when there is a complex task that cuts across organizational and functional boundaries. Teams can also increase ownership and commitment. And teams fit well not only with the new organizational concepts, but also with recent concepts in management execution. Concurrent engineering and integrated product development, for example, rely on teams to execute their concepts. The real trick is to apply teams effectively, when appropriate.

Recipe For Success

That brings up the crux of the problem. Many managers are long on understanding what teams are, but short on understanding exactly how to get them to work. Fortunately, there are a few common ingredients that can help managers cook up something called team synergy, the state in which the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Some of these ingredients are obvious; others are more subtle. Obvious or subtle, setting up and keeping teams working at peak

efficiency requires thorough and deliberate actions from managers and leaders. The first, and maybe the most important of these deliberate actions is the creation of an important and urgent challenge for each team.

Step 1 — Start With An Exciting Challenge

After studying hundreds of teams in the business world, Katzenbach and Smith came to the conclusion that all successful teams have one thing in common: an important and urgent challenge. Unlike individuals, teams don't put forth superhuman efforts to climb mountains just because they're there. Teams climb impossible mountains because they've been inspired that the climb is vitally important to the organization and individuals on the team.

Management's challenge then, is to establish an inspirational challenge, and then to communicate that challenge in a way that convinces the team of both its importance and urgency. Establishing such a challenge is a balancing act between creating a challenge that is a demand for the impossible or on the other end of the scale, an excuse for comfortable mediocrity. To get the most out of a team, a challenge should be just barely attainable, but not so easily attained that teams view it as a walk in the park. Like individuals, teams will tend to rise (or sink) to the occasion. If you want the best, you'll have to ask for it.

Think then of a team's challenge as a vision of the important job the team must achieve. It should be short, easily understood, and easy to remember. And it should describe the team's job in terms that are directly related to the purpose of the team. In Total Quality Management or 'TQM' speak, that means that in one way or another the challenge must point to the reason of existence for the team — the customer.

One example of a highly effective team challenge occurred when

Chrysler formed a team to develop their newest small car, the Neon. They challenged the team to develop the car in 42 short months with a sticker price of only \$8,600. The rallying cry became, "42 months, under \$8,600." Short and understandable, the team's challenge was easy for all to remember. Management also took the time to explain to the team how vitally important their challenge was — that without timely success jobs would be lost, and a hefty share of the market would be conceded to the Japanese. This team's challenge, which pointed the way to eventual success, had all the attributes of a good challenge: difficult, but not impossible; important to both the team and individuals; urgent; and finally, clear and understandable by all. Without a clear and challenging vision, teams can easily end up as a group of people who wander about wondering why management formed a team in the first place.

Step 2 — Mix Well With Winning Players

Once you've established a challenge that's sure to inspire, it's time to pick team members to meet that challenge. Skill and experience in specific areas will be traits most look for first. These traits are certainly important, but they may not be most important within a team context.

In a highly motivated team, a group of workers and doers with adequate functional knowledge will often get more done than a group of renown experts interested only in excellence in their specific area. Select not only for skills, but consider personality and mind-sets also. Managers would do well to look for motivated team members who have adequate expertise with highly developed interpersonal skills. Keep in mind that the nature of an enthusiastic, motivated team will help compensate for team members with less than perfect skills and experience. If a motivated team can't compensate for lower skill levels or experience, they will tend to go looking for additions or help. Observant manag-

ers can watch for such activities and help with additions or temporary assignments as necessary.

There is, however, one member a team cannot compensate for no matter how hard they try. That member is the team leader. With some of the new concepts of teaming surfacing such as open communication and consensus building, many believe that a strong team leader is not necessary. They couldn't be further from the truth. As Capt. Charles Barco said in his article, *Valuing Leadership in an Era of Prophets, Politicians, and Pugilists*, "Leadership doesn't end with the formation of quality teams; it is the heart of quality teams."

And while today's prevailing management wisdom says a team leader's primary role is as a coordinator, the leader must at times fulfill the role of director. James P. Womack, Daniel T. Jones and Daniel Roos, authors of *The Machine That Changed the World*, point out the importance of a competent team leader, not a coordinator, with authority commensurate with responsibility. Assigning functionals who owe their heart and pocketbook to the home office, and then asking team leaders to cajole and persuade them to do what is best for the team, not the home office, is next to impossible. As proof they point to the successful Japanese *shusa* system, pioneered by Toyota, which calls for a strong leader with functionals being formally assigned to the team (and this is key, they say), with the functionals' careers tied to the success or failure of the team. Choose the right team captain to lead and inspire a team, set up the team properly, and whatever the team's job, amazing results can occur.

Step 3 — Throw In Expectations, Stir With A Charter

After establishing a challenge and picking team members, it's time to establish exactly what you expect from the team. One method of doing just

that is a charter. Perhaps one of the best known examples of the use of a charter in earlier times was Christopher Columbus' charter for his trip to the New World. Before he sailed off on his quest, Columbus and Queen Isabella's agents negotiated a charter called the Capitulations. Queen Isabella would pay for ships and other expenses, and Columbus would make discoveries in Queen Isabella's name. By negotiating the agreement with Columbus, Queen Isabella's agents gave Columbus a sense of ownership of the terms of the charter. And by agreeing that Columbus would act in her name, Queen Isabella gave Columbus full empowerment to accomplish his mission.

The same concepts hold true today. Before a team starts off on its own quest, a charter of some sort should be negotiated between the team and management. Under the concepts of TQM, the vision and mission [read challenge here] of any organization should be broken down into goals and objectives, and teams are no exception in this respect. With a set of objectives laid out as yardsticks in a charter, teams have interim targets to shoot for that tells them whether or not they are making progress toward their challenge. Without such measurements, the long climb up the mountain can often seem unachievable.

Concerning the resources a team will need, the charter should list such resources as manpower and money available to the team. By listing these resources, it's not only the team that's making a commitment, it's management's way of committing itself and agreeing that the team is empowered to use those resources. No team wants a charter that lists only their 'to dos' and responsibilities. Under such a scenario, a charter becomes just another set of orders, rather than an agreement between the team and management.

Another, perhaps just as important aspect of a team charter deals with the

boundaries you want the team to stay within. Some teams will not have the experience to recognize when they're getting into trouble, while others will know they're in trouble but they'll wait until the last minute to ask for help. Without some sort of mechanism to signal that a team is approaching trouble, managers can find themselves trying to bail out inexperienced teams after their boat has already sunk. Many managers assume that teams will somehow sense how far they can go before they report back to their boss, but that's not always true. Nobody wants to admit they're getting into trouble, especially when the admission must be made to the boss.

To help keep teams out of such trouble, the charter should give the team thresholds associated with the budget (or other restraints such as schedule). If the team has a 10-percent safety pad in their budget, the manager may want to know when that pad is down to 5 percent, for example. If thresholds are going to be breached, the team should come back to management for help and consultation. As long as they stay within their limits and thresholds, there should be no need to consult with management on team-initiated changes.

While the temptation will be to write down all details about a team's existence in a charter, a good charter is not elaborate or extensive. A perfect example of less is more, charters are most effective when they're simple. Too much detail and the team will have its hands tied behind its back. With simplicity comes flexibility and empowerment. Nor is the charter something the manager writes and forces down the team's throat. On the contrary, the establishment of boundaries, goals, and objectives in the charter must be a group project between the team and management if you want the team to buy into it.

Really then, a charter is nothing more than a simple agreement between management and a team as to

what the team's mission, goals, and objectives are; a list of resources available to the team; any important thresholds; and a short explanation of its responsibilities. Moreover, a charter forces a team to take care of business with a back-to-basics approach. In the vernacular of standard management principles, it is the team's 'plan' part of plan, organize, direct, coordinate, and control. With thresholds, it can also act as management's 'control' of the same.

Step 4 — Bake Well In A Team Environment

With the challenge established, members chosen, and a charter written, it's time to make sure the team is living and working in an environment that's supportive of teams. Setting up a team environment is like building a house — if you get the foundation right, everything else fits together a lot easier.

When you build a team, you create a brand new culture with its own values and behavioral norms that translate directly into specific behavior. Take advantage of this concept and encourage team members to set up team-oriented rules of engagement as soon as possible after a team is formed. House rules with established concepts — e.g., team meetings take priority; all team members get confidentiality and support from each other; no finger pointing; and other such rules — can go far in creating an open and creative team environment.

Early in the team's life is also the time to train team members about what it means to be on a team. For those who were always told what to do and when to do it, the freewheeling atmosphere of an empowered team can be confusing. A common mistake of managers is that they assume their workers are as up-to-speed on new management concepts and philosophies as they are. Concepts in the charter like mission, goals, and objectives can be puzzling to those who haven't been told the subtle differ-

ences between the three. As a minimum, managers should set up sessions where basic team concepts and expectations are explained. Without such sessions, you'll have as many interpretations as you have teams.

Another vital step to setting up the right team environment is to examine current procedures and processes and modify them as necessary to support your new team structure. If written procedures require that any new design be reviewed and approved by functional organizations, you've squashed any hope of your team's feeling empowered and responsible for the design of their product. Many managers rush into a new team structure thinking they'll change procedures as they go along. It's not long before those managers find that transitioning to a team environment takes a lot longer than they ever expected.

It may sound trite, but one of the best ways to get a team to act like a team is to treat them like a team. One way to do this is to reward the team for its efforts as a team. If you reward individual accomplishment, individual accomplishment is what you'll get. While leaders and managers have always been able to come up with individual rewards, the trick in a team environment is to think team awards, not individual awards. If you do give out individual awards, make sure they are for acts that contribute directly to meeting the team's mission and goals, and make a point of this when the award is handed out. Team awards for collective work products can range from recognition in front of other teams, to team time off for accomplishments. One easy way to make sure everyone benefits from an award and to build team cohesiveness is to make a celebration out of meeting a milestone in the team's charter. Smart team leaders will negotiate their charters with a few easy milestones upfront, and give themselves a built-in chance to celebrate and build team spirit early in the team's life.

Another effective idea for building team spirit is to create a unique, identifying feature for the team. One team leader who fought for years to collocate his team, was finally successful when an organization-wide move was initiated. A few days after the team was collocated, American flags sprang up on all of their offices and cubicles. Soon, everyone in the organization knew of the 'flag team', and team members had a feeling of belonging to a special team.

There are a number of such team-building exercises that managers and leaders can apply, but the real trick is to give serious thought to creating teams and then to take positive action to create a team environment. Don't assume that team cohesiveness and team spirit will automatically happen. That elusive phantom of team synergy is just that — elusive. To capture it takes work and thought from leaders and managers.

Step 5 — Serve With Generous Helpings of Leadership and Management

The recognition that setting up successful teams is an art and science in its own right is the final ingredient in setting up successful teams. None of the previous tips will insure that your teams are successful unless they're combined with the realization that creating successful teams requires a lot more than just reorganizing your current organization.

Nor are any of these tips rocket science. Creating a challenge, drafting winning players, establishing a plan and expectations, and creating a team environment require the application of good old fashioned leadership and basic management principles. And remember, synergy doesn't just happen. It's cooked up with hard thought and conscious actions by the leaders and managers in an organization.

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